

CITATION
Richard Woolcott AC

The 2008 Sir Edward "Weary" Dunlop Asia Medal is awarded today to Richard Woolcott in recognition of his tireless contribution to Australia's relationships with Asia.

This award particularly highlights the importance of public diplomacy - educating the Australian public about foreign policy issues - of which Dick Woolcott can truly be called the Australian pioneer.

From an early stage in his career, Dick Woolcott became the face of Australian diplomacy. Dick - he is known high and low by his friendly diminutive – studied at The University of Melbourne and entered the then Department of External Affairs in 1950.

It was a time when older Australians still referred to Britain as "home" but wartime events and post-war independence struggles taught that home was in Southeast Asia and the Southwest Pacific.

His Russian language skills earned Dick two postings in Moscow during the 1950s in some of the chilliest periods of the Cold War. In the early 1960s, Sir Arthur Tange brought Dick to the department in Canberra and into the inner circle of successive prime ministers from Sir Robert Menzies onwards.

It gave him a chance to throw off much of the unnecessary mystique and secrecy that surrounded foreign policy issues. Not just the "experts" but the Australian public should be informed, so that policy rested on public support.

It was Dick Woolcott who drafted the speech to parliament by Harold Holt after his path-breaking Asian tour in 1967, in which Holt declared Australia was "part of Asia" and it was "a basic tenet of our national policy to live in friendship and understanding with our Asian neighbours".

Dick Woolcott later played a significant role in the transition from the Coalition rule to the election of the Whitlam Government.

It was Dick Woolcott who suggested the Whitlam lines at his first press conference that policies would be directed "towards a more independent Australian stance in international affairs, an Australia which will be less militarily orientated and not open to the suggestion of racism, an Australia which will enjoy a growing standing as a distinctive, tolerant, cooperative and well-regarded nation, not only in the Asian and Pacific region but in the world at large."

His best-known foreign posting came in 1975 to 1978 to Jakarta, covering the invasion and annexation of Portuguese Timor by Indonesia. The role of the Australian Government through this crisis is still hotly debated, and as both the point man for Australian diplomacy with the Suharto Government and an influential voice in the development of Canberra's policy, Dick Woolcott came in for more public controversy than encountered by most diplomats.

A close study of his work shows that Dick always practised what he preached about exposing the record to open scrutiny. He included dissenting opinions from his political staff in cables to Canberra, he was always ready to take a call from or meet journalists to talk about sometimes-bitter criticism. Despite many canards, Dick always placed the interests of Australia first and foremost.

Dick then went to the United Nations for six years, a period that included two years in the Security Council, the last time Australia held the rotating non-permanent position for our group of UN members.

He returned in 1988 to head the Department of Foreign Affairs, where he was our chief diplomat during momentous changes in the world order. In Canberra itself, Dick had to bed down the merger of the separate Foreign Affairs and Trade departments.

But it was in two regional initiatives that Dick Woolcott put the successful cap on a long career. One was the Cambodian peace settlement, worked out in close cooperation between Canberra and Jakarta. The other was the formation of APEC, which held its inaugural meeting in Canberra in 1989 after months of advocacy by Dick Woolcott with Asian leaders.

Dick formally retired in 1992, but the last 16 years have hardly seen him disengaged. As chairman of the Australia-Indonesia Institute, he quietly used his contacts to help keep relations on a bedrock of friendship and understanding, especially through the turbulence that included the Asian financial crisis and Australia leading an international peace-keeping force into East Timor.

To read Dick's memoirs is to see the great effort he put into smoothing the raw emotions in Jakarta left by the Howard Government's switch of Timor policy and the later intervention, to reconciling the new leaders of Timor Leste and the Indonesian leadership, and indeed to reconciling in his own mind the thinking of 1975 and the outcome of 1999.

He was enlisted for second-track diplomacy to try to win back Malaysia's former prime minister, Mahathir Mohamed, to a more equable relationship with Canberra. The Asia Society AustralAsia Centre was launched in 1997 under Dick's guidance to broaden interest and understanding in Australia of Asian countries, their politics, business and culture. In his role as the Founding Director, his knowledge and understanding of Australia's role in the Asia region was pivotal in establishing the Centre in Australia. His personal connections with political, business, non-governmental leaders and decision makers from Australia and the Asian region were invaluable. More recently Prime Minister Rudd enlisted Dick to pursue the idea of a new regional security and economic architecture.

Dick enjoys the humorous side of events, but his last book, *Undiplomatic Activities*, shows him willing to speak out about unwise policies. He spoke out against the second invasion of Iraq, the erosion of civil liberties, the threat to the public service by limited term contracts for department heads, and the undermining of truth and honesty in government by the rise of political "spin doctors".

Though sadly deprived on the companionship of his wife, Birgit, who passed away early this year, Dick Woolcott is still an active and wise counsel for our national leaders and interested citizens. Today we honour and thank Dick Woolcott for his long and distinguished contribution to Australia's relations with Asia.